

The Qemant Ethnicity: Identity Contestations, Negotiations, and Conflicts

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Abstract

In long historical processes, ethno-cultural features of minority groups may vanish, and their identities may blur in favour of the majority ethnic group. However, in other historical contexts, usually triggered by political changes, ethnic markers and boundaries might be re-activated, and the identity could be reclaimed. Drawing on qualitative data collected through interviews, systematic observations and focus group discussions, this article examines politics of identity and the reconstruction of Qemant ethnicity in Ethiopia. It emphasizes on the processes of the Qemant's quest for ethnic recognition and self-administration in the Amhara National Regional State of Ethiopia. The findings indicate that 'lost' ethnicity could be reclaimed regardless of the waning of objective ethno-cultural features such as language, religion, and social organizations. Symbolic and subjective accounts can be reckoned and thereby ethnic boundary may be reframed in new forms. However, the reclaim of identity by minority groups could invite counter-reaction from the majority group that perceives the rights of minorities as a threat to the existing social order.

Keywords: *ethnicity, ethno-cultural features, ethnic identifications, ethnic conflicts, minorities*

Introduction

This article examines the process of ethnic identity (re)construction among the Qemant, a minority group largely inhabiting Central and West Gondar Zones of the Amhara Regional State. Using constructivist approach to ethnic identity as a conceptual framework, we assess the

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role of the state and the changing political processes in (re)constructing and consolidating ethnic identity of the Qemant within the contending ethnic majority, the Amhara. We make two arguments in the paper; (1) objective cultural features are important markers of ethnic identity though not necessary for people to (re)claim and become assertive of their identity, and (2) the politics of ethnic and state construction has an impact on ethnic self-understandings, identity (re)construction and consolidation.

In this article, we use constructivism in its broader meaning to explain how individuals and groups are treated as agents in shaping and reshaping their identities and boundaries out of history, assumed common descent, culture and memory of past identifications (Schlee 2007:430; Cornell 1996:266; Nagel 1994:153). Individual actors representing ethnic groups are “actively involved in the construction and reconstruction of identities, negotiating boundaries, asserting meanings, interpreting their own pasts, resisting the imposition of the present, and claiming the future” (Cornell and Hartmann 1998:101). In situations where there are overlapping features of identification, elites, who claim to represent the groups, selectively emphasize and de-emphasize their belonging.

Presumed common ancestry, history, language, religion and custom can be considered as objective features of identity construction; they either inform or constrain the processes of identification of an individual or a group. However, since Barth’s publication in 1969, the focus of identity studies has shifted from the totality of the objective features of a group to a selection of the actors’ most significant features in a given situation. Groups, such as the Qemant, struggle to achieve recognition as a distinct ethnic group without the presence of the above-mentioned objective features. Often, such an apparent struggle for identity is motivated by the rapid socio-political change (Schlee 2004).

This shows the state plays a crucial role in identity construction (Verdery 1994:39). In Ethiopia, a country prominent for identity based political upheavals and recurrent ‘re-mapping’ of the domestic borders (James et al. 2002), the state-making process tends to make identity imperative. In the post 1991-Ethiopia, identity has become a critical factor to assume political positions and resources. This prompted many minority groups in the country to pursue and fight for their identities to be recognized. To manage those overwhelming demands, the House

of Federation established an office known as the Constitutional and Regional Affairs to handle issues related to identity claims.

In 2001, the Siltie, which was regarded as one of the groups of the Gurage ethnic group, was the first to be treated by Proclamation Number 251/2001 that was meant to consolidate the performance of the House of Federation of the FDRE allowing them to vote on their ethnicity after a decade of confrontations with Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) and the Federal Government of Ethiopia (Kairedin 2018; Smith 2007). The vote has resulted in the establishment of the Siltie zone¹⁹² where they exercise independent administrative authority.

Siltie's success has encouraged other minority groups to ask for recognition. This is evident in the increasing number of ethnic groups with representatives at the House of Federation. Between the endorsement of the Constitution, 1995 to 2000, the number of ethnic groups officially recognized by the government was fifty-eight (Aalen 2002). From 2001 to 2008, this figure reached seventy-four (Fekadu 2009). The cases of several others, most of them from SNNPRS, are still pending.¹⁹³

In the quest for recognition and self-administration, resources also play an important role. Regional states allocate budget they receive from the federal state to zones as per the general provision on budget expenditure. Thus, groups with administrative power at district level get to control the resources (Fekadu 2014; Baylis 2004).

However, not all claimed identities and quests for self-administration have been successful. Welene community under the Gurage zone of SNNPRS (Beza and Negussie 2020) and the Sheekash from Afdeer zone of Somali national regional state (Hagmann 2007) can be taken as an example of ethnic groups that have been contesting for recognition for over a decade. Similarly, the historically nomadic Gabra in Southern Ethiopia, territorially divided between Oromia and Somali national regional states, have also failed to have a special district administrative unit. The Gabra's demography and the extent of territorial occupation have not allowed them to achieve an autonomous administrative unit (Fekadu 2009, 2014).

192 Zone is an administrative unit lower than the regional state

193 *Addis Admass*, www.Addisadmas.com (accessed on 23.05.2009).

Similar to the Siltie, Qemant's quest for identities, contestations and negotiations with the Amhara national regional state has also been fueled by the post-1991 period that institutionalized and related identity claims and state resources. However, unlike the Siltie, the Qemant have lost most of their ethno-cultural features policy makers use as major criteria to recognize as distinct ethnic group (FDRE Constitution 1995).

Setting the Research Context

Most researches on ethnicity in Ethiopia have focused on the south, southwestern, and eastern parts of the country while the northern region has largely been assumed as ethno-culturally homogenous, marked by its traditional Orthodox Christian Culture (Schmidt 2011:107). However, there are different ethnic minorities in different parts of northern Ethiopia of which the Agaw enclaves are one (Gamst 1968:4). These include the Northern Agaw (the Bilen in present Eritrea), Eastern Agaw (the Himra in Wollo), Western Agaw (the Qemant in Gondar), and Southern Agaw (the Awi in Gojjam) (Zealealem 2003:30). The Kunfäl (Desalegn 2016), Damot, and Fälašša¹⁹⁴ are also part of the Agaw minorities (Gamst 1968:3). As stated in the introduction, the article deals with the Qemant among these ethnic minorities in Northern Ethiopia.

The Qemant inhabits a broader territory in Central and West Gondar zones of the Amhara national regional state. Some surviving cultural markers of the Qemant shows their historical commonality with the other Agaw groups. Kemantney language as a surviving ethno-cultural marker is similar to other Agaw groups. Some surviving ancestral religion of the Qemant is also considered the historical religion of the Agaw before conversion to Christianity.¹⁹⁵ More importantly, recently,

194 Some other scholars (e.g. Stern 1862) identified them as Ethiopian Jewish or Bëtä Israëlis (the House of Israel).

195 The ancestral religion of the Qemant was identified differently by different scholars. For example, Simoons (1960:23) defined it "ancient pagan religion." Similarly, Gamst (1969:4) characterized it as a form of composition of syncretized pagan and Hebraic elements, with a few Christian features that make it "pagan-Hebraic." Still, Tourny (2009:1226) mentioned that the ancestral religion of the Qemant comprised of animistic, many Hebraic, and some Christian elements that cannot be summarized by one definition. However, our informants from the surviving practitioners of the religion identified it alternatively as "*hegä Abraham*" (the law of Abraham), "*hegä libona*" (the law of conscience), and "*hegä Orit*" (law of Orit), which was noted to be performed in line with the Biblical tradition of the Old Testament.

the Qemant and the other Agaw groups have been trying to reconstruct the historical unity based on the claims to common ancestry, through establishing common political parties. The first such initiative was the launch in 2013 of Agaw Democratic Party (AgDP). With members from Awi, Himra, and Qemant, AgDP's intention was mobilizing members from the historical Agaw enclaves and thereby re-establishing their unity.¹⁹⁶ The Agaw National Congress (ANC) was formed in January 2019, jointly by AgDP and Qemant Democratic Party, with the aim of creating a common platform that would enable them to work together for the interest of the Agaw peoples in general.

The article is mainly based on data gathered as part of the PhD dissertation project of one of the authors, defended in December 2018.¹⁹⁷ The empirical data was drawn from fieldwork in Gondar, Chilga, and Lay Armachio *woredas*. It was generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with government officials, members of the 'Committee to Quest for the Qemant's Identity', community members, elders, youth and women. Focus group discussions were undertaken with heterogeneous social categories from local residents of the research sites. As the fieldwork was carried out during the climax of the political movement for the Qemant identity, systematic observation of the situation was also very helpful. Besides, relevant documents and reports from the administrative offices of the *woredas* were also consulted.

196 SBS Interview with Mr. Musie Abraham, Agaw Democratic Party (ADP's) Foreign Relations Representative. <http://www.tigraionline.com/articles/adp-musie-abraham.html>. Accessed on 18.10.2020

197 The article is part of Dawit Yosef's PhD dissertation, and the second author served as a supervisor of the dissertation project. Data collection for the dissertation was financially supported by Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropology. The authors are grateful to Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropology for its generous support.

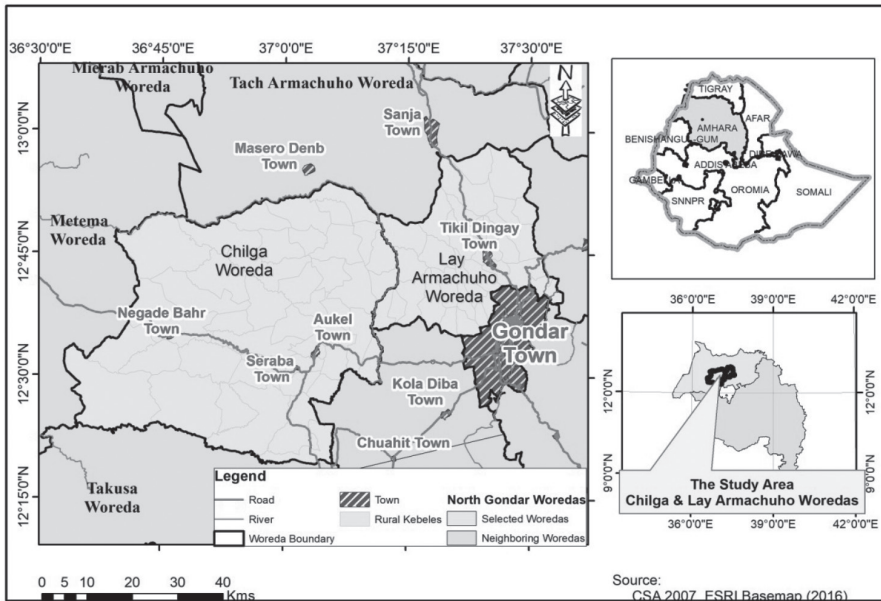


Fig.1. Map of the research sites (Chilga, Gondar city and Lay Armachio)

A Brief Mythical and Historical Background to the Qemant Identity

Historical Background of the Qemant

According to Gamst (1969:7), the name Qemant was first used by James Bruce, Scottish traveler, in 1790. This historical account shows that the Qemant were baptized into Christianity in the early 1600s by Emperor Fasiladas (1632-1667) of Gondar. Gamst (1969:vii), on the other hand, traced the Christianization of the Qemant back to the thirteenth century when the surrounding dominant Amhara began to exert influence on the Qemant. Nevertheless, the Qemant existed as “relatively culturally independent and socially and politically semi-autonomous from the surrounding dominant Amhara” (Gamst 1968:3-9) for a long period of time. In this long historical process, the Qemant appeared to have maintained their own religious beliefs and practices and control over their land by agreeing to submit peacefully and pay tribute to the dominant Amhara (Quirin 1998:204).

The earlier tolerance of Christianity to the Qemant ancestral religious institutions was reversed by Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889) who carried out a forced Christianization (Quirin 1998:217; Gamst

1969:116). This was the period the majority of the Qemant had been forced to practice Christianity leading to the opening up of the socio-cultural system of the Qemant to external influences (Gamst 1969:119). The intervention in local affairs and cultural homogenization was heightened during the reign of Haile-Sellassie (1931-1974) when the remaining practitioners of Qemant politico-religious residues were threatened with the loss of use rights to their land (Gamst 1969:121). According to Qemant elders' accounts, in the 1950s, as the Christianization and cultural homogenization processes intensified, the rupturing of the Qemant objective cultural markers and ethnic symbols was deepened.

Background to the Qemant Quest for Identity

The post-1991 Ethiopian federal political structure privileges diversities and prioritizes groups based on ethnic identities. The 1995 Constitution, at least theoretically, guarantees the unrestricted right of nations and nationalities to self-determination up to secession (FDRE Constitution 1995). This has allowed minority ethnic groups in the different regional states to be entitled to their own sub-regional administrative structures (Asnake 2009). Similarly, the Amhara national regional state Constitution has entitled the Awi, Himra, and the Oromo nationalities within the region to their own special zone administration, where they use their own languages in school, administration, and the court. The minority Argoba are also entitled to their own special *woreda*, a lower level administrative structure. The 1992/7 proclamation¹⁹⁸ that established the transitional administration of the Amhara national regional state had listed down the names of ethnic groups that were recognized for self-administration. However, unlike the Awi, Himra, the Oromo and the Argoba, this proclamation did not recognize the Qemant as a distinct ethnic category. The Amhara national regional state Constitution limits the "peoples of the Amhara Region" to groups that are labelled as 'endogenous' to the region based on the transitional period proclamation (Amhara Regional State 2001; see also Van der Beken 2007).¹⁹⁹

198 Proclamation No. 7, 1992 a proclamation to provide for the establishment of national/regional self-governments. *Negarit gazeta*, year 51, no. 2, 14th January 1992

199 The constitution, however, does not prove a clear distinction between endogenous and exogenous groups.

As to why the Qemant were not recognized by the proclamation, contradicting reasons were proposed by participants of this study. According to some officials of the regional government, majority of the Qemant deemphasized their ethnic distinction from the Amhara during the transitional period, and did not give due response to their elite's call for ethnic recognition. The majority Qemant rather lay emphasis on the deep-rooted socio-cultural and marital ties they have had with the Amhara. Contrary to this view, the Qemant informants argued they were denied the opportunity to be recognized as a distinct ethnic group without any apparent justifications from the regional government that was dominated by the Amhara.

Other informants argued that, owing to the pejorative labelling and identifications, many of the people lacked the confidence to publicly identify themselves as Qemant. In relation to their ancestral religious traditions, the Qemant were stereotypically labelled by their Amhara neighbors as *yä'ənčät ləj* (son of wood), *yä'ənčät zär* (descendants of wood), *yä'ənčät fərə* (born of wood), among others.²⁰⁰ Thus, until the recent intensified politics of identity, identification with the Qemant was an unfavourable experience. As a result, when the country was reconstituted into an ethno-linguistic based federation after 1991, identity issue was raised only by few educated Qemant ethnic members who did not obtain the necessary support from the ethnic mass.

While each of the above arguments has some truth, the ethnic based federal structure had also its own limitation. Regardless of the constitutional definition of ethnic groups,²⁰¹ the administrative structures were fundamentally organized based on objective ethnic markers, mainly language as a main criterion for the delineation of ethnic boundaries and ethnic identity (Vaughan 2003; Abbink 1998; Cohen 1995). This must have discouraged the Qemant for whom was

200 The practice of the Qemant religious ritual under groves of trees which was strange for other peoples of northern and central Ethiopia that led to the characterization of the Qemant as "originated in wood" (Gamst 1969:86). The Qemant were known with "wood", "worshippers of wood" or "born of wood" because of their association as carriers of wood, worshippers in sacred groves of trees, and wearers of wooden earrings (Quirin 1998:217).

201 Article 39 (5) of the federal Constitution identifies 'nation, nationalities, and peoples' (roughly ethnic groups) of Ethiopia as: "a group of people who have or share a large measure of a common culture or similar customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in common or related identities, a common psychological makeup, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory".

hard to meet this linguistic criterion and other objective ethno-cultural features.

The Qemant elite started posing demands for ethnic recognition in the early 1990s.²⁰² It was initiated by few educated and politically conscious members of the ethnic group who were said to have been upset by the 'denial of recognition' by the regional state in 1992. However, at the beginning, the elites could not attract support from the mass. As stated earlier, majority of the Qemant either lacked self-confidence to publicly identify themselves as Qemant or it was unimaginable for them to delineate a distinct boundary from the Amhara with whom they shared a strong socio-cultural attachment. Many members of the ethnic group have accused the minority elite of being power mongers, while the remaining did not have a clear understanding for why the group asked for recognition (Zealealem 2003).

Unlike the 1992 regional proclamation that failed to recognize the Qemant, the 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia presented the Qemant as a distinct ethnic group in the Amhara National Regional State. The census showed the total number of the Qemant population to be 172, 291, out of which kemantney (the ethnic language) was the mother tongue for 1,625 people while 3,450 spoke it as their second language (CSA 1994). However, the 2007 National Population and Housing Census failed to include the Qemant in the list of ethnic groups. In the documents prepared for the census, the Qemant were given the alternative to be enumerated either as "Amhara" or "Others". Nonetheless, neither the Qemant elite nor the Amhara officials were able to provide a reason for this.

The failure of the 2007 census to include the Qemant as an ethnic group was effectively exploited by ethnic activists in their effort to mobilize the mass. Indeed, it was used as a turning point and a strategic resource to organize the mass under the leadership of the educated and politically active ethnic elites.

The Qemant elite condemned the census incident to be an "act of ethnocide" in comparison to the visibility of the ethnic group during the previous imperial and Derg regimes. During the Imperial times, the Qemant, recognized as an ethnic group, used to pay tax through *Ba'labat* (a local representative). The presence of the Qemant was also acknowledged during the Derg. An indication to this is the recognition

202 Sources from the office of the committee for the quest of the Qemant identity

given to the ethnic group in the 1984 Population and Housing Census and a study by the then Institute of Ethiopian Nationalities. According to the 1984 census, the total population of the Qemant was 169,168.

Out of this, 166,973 people were identified as speakers of kemantney as their first language, which was quite significant compared to 1,625 people registered in the 1994 census (CSA 1984).

By referring to the above documents, the Qemant activists characterized the absence of the Qemant from the 2007 National Census as “a historical mess,” an “act of ethnocide,” and a “forceful Amharization”. Almost all participants in this study considered it as violation of the very right to the existence of their ethnic identity. Following the 2007 census, the Qemant held a demonstration in Gondar city protesting the absence of their ethnic group in the national census. The mobilization of ethnic group members continued thereafter to demand not only recognition but also self-administration.

However, this was differently interpreted by the Amhara elite, who considered this as a political conspiracy by the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) led federal government of Ethiopia. The Amhara elite argue, by intentionally cancelling the Qemant Census Code and creating grievance among them, the TPLF dominated federal government intended to provoke a reactive ethnic mobilization from the Qemant and thereby creating hostilities between the cohabiting Qemant and Amhara. They accused the TPLF of deliberately causing instabilities in the region and contributing to the fragmentation of power of the Amhara people. Amhara officials accuse the federal government of secretly initiating and supporting the question of the Qemant for self-administration; the exclusion of the Qemant in the 2007 census, according to the Amhara officials, is a step taken by the federal government to mobilize the Qemant around that cause. However, there is no evidence to support this.

The Identity Negotiations

With the subsequent intensification of mobilization, the Qemant elite consolidated their movement on 24th of May 2009 by electing the Qemant Organizing Committee, constituting 120 educated and politically conscious community members. The organizing committee consulted proclamation Number 251/2001 of the FDRE, which gives

the House of Federation the power to decide on issues related to the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples to self-determination.²⁰³

According to this proclamation, application of request for identity and self-administration by an ethnic group has to be supported by the detail accounts of at least five percent of the population of the claimant group. The detail accounts in this regard includes their names, addresses and signatures. Calculating the necessary ratio from the 1994 National Census, the organizing committee collected 18,584 signatures and submitted to the Amhara national regional state and to the House of Federation on July 22nd 2009.

However, the House of Federation directed the request to be first considered by the Amhara national regional state. Indeed, Article 20(1) of proclamation No 251/2001 states that such issues shall be submitted to the House only under conditions that the question has not been given due solution by the various organs in the administrative hierarchy of the state concerned. Accordingly, the Amhara regional government conducted dialogues and negotiations with the organizing committee. As part of the dialogues and negotiations, the regional state commissioned studies to produce evidences to help reach decisions.

A study was carried out in January 2011 by a committee organized by the regional government constituting individuals selected from different government offices. Members' selection or the research tools used, however, was not clear. The study targeted language, culture and territoriality as criteria of ethnic identification, and its findings revealed that only those who were above the age of sixty could speak Kemantney, scattered across different localities. They were reported to have not used the language in their day to day lives. Without providing any specific definition of 'culture', the study mentioned that the Qemant did not have a culture that was different from the surrounding Amhara people. However, the presence of a category of people who identified themselves as Qemant was noted; they were reported to have lived either together with the Amhara or in their own *kebeles*. Though this study did not make any recommendation, its findings implicitly suggested the Qemant did not qualify for recognition as an ethnic group.

203 This proclamation was passed to consolidate the performance of the House of Federation of the FDRE (Federal Negarit Gazeta of the FDRE; Seventh year No. 41, six-July-2001).

Accusing it for lack of credibility and transparency, the organizing committee of the Qemant refused to recognize the results of the study. Indeed, when the result of the study was presented and discussed, the regional government officials expressed their interest in keeping the territorial integrity of the region by avoiding further fragmentation in the name of self-administration.²⁰⁴

Due to the continuous demand from the Qemant, another study was launched in March 2012 in which researchers were represented from both sides. But, in the midst of the study, disagreement over the research procedures and techniques of selecting study participants interrupted the study. On 30th of May 2012, however, discussions and negotiations recommenced with the presence of delegates from the federal government. After further discussions and negotiations, it was decided to conduct another study by an independent body. However, due to continued pressure from the local community as well as the federal government, the regional government accepted the quest for Qemant's identity based on the evidences the organizing committee provided without further study.

The organizing committee presented evidences for Qemant's identity at a session held on 19th of October 2013, which was attended by regional and federal state officials. The organizing committee presented the presence of the Qemant in 126 *kebeles* that were located across eight *woredas* of the then North Gondar Zone administration. This included Gondar Zuria, Chilga, Lay Armachio, Chilga, Wogera, Dembyia, Quwara, and Metema *woredas*. The organizing committee, in addition, gave details of territorial settlement of the Qemant and the Amhara in the *Kebeles*. The organizing committee conducted a census in fifty-three selected *kebeles* to prove the existence and use of Kemantney; the organizing committee claimed that 6,645 people spoke the language in the selected *kebeles*.

In the report by the organizing committee, it was indicated that there are *kebeles* in the area fully inhabited by either the Qemant or the Amhara; some *kebeles* were dominantly inhabited by the Qemant but with small parishes (*goṭs*) inhabited by the Amhara and others were identified as populated by the Amhara but constituted small parishes of the Qemant. From this, excluding *kebeles* exclusively inhabited by the Amhara and those wherein the Qemant are minorities, the committee

204 Dawit Yosef, the first author of the article, had attended the meeting wherein the result of the study was presented and discussed on January 4, 2012 in Bahir Dar.

identified and claimed a total of 126 *kebeles*, adjacent and contiguous territorial unit that historically and at present belonged to the Qemant. The Qemant organizing committee used language and the contiguity of settlement as criteria to identify the *kebeles*. However, the Qemant elite extended the criteria to include religious practices in asserting their identity.

Nonetheless, the regional government contested what was presented by the organizing committee and wanted to verify the existence of Kemantney speakers in the identified *kebeles*. In addition, the presumed cultural distinction of the Qemant from the Amhara as it was presented by the organizing committee was also questioned. The regional government argued that, in order to make 'a final decision' on the demand of the Qemant, it needs further clarifications.

The Allegedly Concluding Study

Due to disagreements over most of the criteria, a 'final and conclusive study' was suggested to be conducted under the auspices of North Gondar administrative zone of the Amhara national regional state. This time, the focus was on the territorial distribution of Kemantney speakers; the extent and geography where the language was commonly used in the day-to-day life of the people. It also targeted to examine whether or not a "common culture, custom, way of life, and psychological makeup" existed among the Qemant. These features, which constitute the constitutional criteria for 'nation, nationalities, and peoples', were considered as attributes that would prove the Qemant as a distinct ethnic group. Though not clearly articulated, it was also suggested to assess the existing economic, social, and political situation in the area.

The findings of the study again indicated that the knowledge of the Kemantney was limited to very few elders who lived in non-contiguous and widely scattered places. It also revealed that the language was not used as a means of communication or interaction in the daily lives of the local people. The study further explained that only a handful of people in Chilga *woreda* practiced the religious traditions of their ethnic ancestors while majority of the Qemant were identified as Orthodox Christians. However, the study acknowledged the presence of a group of people who, on the basis of their feeling of ethnic ancestry and descent, subjectively identified themselves as Qemant. But, this group of people were said to have lacked the knowledge of Kemantney.

Based on the findings from the study, the Amhara national regional state council passed a decision on 11th of August 2013.²⁰⁵ The council asserted that the Qemant historically existed as a distinct ethnic group with their own unique ethno-cultural features. However, according to this deliberation, the Qemant have assimilated into the Amhara culture, making it difficult to distinguish specific ethno-cultural features that make the Qemant different.

Article 39(5) of the constitution states groups who claim distinct identity are required to have their own common language, culture, believe, psychological makeup and territorial contiguity. The article further states that nation, nationality and people or ethnic group is “a group of people [...] who predominantly inhabit an identifiable contiguous territory” (FDRE Constitution 1995: Article 39(5)). Based on this, the council stated:

የቅማነትን ህዝብ የለም ብሎ የተከራከረ ባደኖርም የራስ አስተዳደር አካባቢን የማቋቋም ጥያቄው ግን ህግ መንግስታዊ መስፈርቶችን ባለማሟላቱ ተቀባይነት አንዲሌለው ውሳኔ ተላልፏል።

Though no one ever denied the existence of the Qemant people, their demand for self-administration was not accepted as it did not fulfill the constitutional provision.

Switching Criteria: the Qemant’s Response

The Qemant reacted to the council’s decision by framing their counter narratives. The Qemant criticized how the regional government interpreted and handled the constitutional provision, correlating territorial settlement to ethnic identity. On the other hand, the argument maintained by the Qemant was that ‘contiguous territory’ ought to be identified on the basis of the pattern of settlement of the people who identify themselves as Qemant rather than those who actually speak Kemantney.

Further, they emphasized that belief in common ancestry and experiences of prejudices and negative stereotypes were boundaries that mark the Qemant as a distinct ethnic category from the Amhara. They refuted the emphasis on objective ethno-cultural features such as language and culture to be criteria for their ethnic identification. An informant asked: “How big or small may be the proportion of the

205 Article 46(2) of the Proclamation No. 59/2001 stated “the highest executive organ of the regional state is the council of the regional government.”

speakers of the Qemant language, should this be taken as a ground for denying our identity?" This actually supports Fredrick Barth's (1969) argument that:

[...] although ethnic categories take cultural differences into account, we can assume no simple one-to-one relationship between ethnic units and cultural similarities and differences. The features that are taken into account are not the sum of 'objective' differences, but only those which the actors themselves regard as significant (Barth 1969:14).

Thus, for the Qemant, not speaking Kemantney should not stop them from identifying themselves as a distinct ethnic group. The Qemant informants argued that the belief in their distinct identity supported by their perception of common descent and cultural residues are sufficient evidences for their claims. On the other side, the Amhara informants highlighted the socio-cultural similarities and deep-rooted marriage ties between the Qemant and the Amhara as evidences of their 'oneness' and denounced the claims of ethnic differences between the two. This was commonly expressed as "*tägabetäna*" (we are affinal), "*täwaledäna*" (we are kin), "*aberän bäletäna* *ṭäṭetäna*" (we have shared dishes). So, among the Amhara community the quest for identity and self-administration of the Qemant was largely understood negatively as divisive. The Qemant informants counter such argument saying, "*tägabetän täzamedän benenorem eñña Qemant honän enäsu Amhara honäw näw*" (though we have been intermarrying and have become affinal, we were Qemant and they were Amhara). Indeed, to the argument of the leaders of the Qemant quest for identity and self-administration, being predominantly Amharic speakers and sharing of cultural features should be considered as a positive factor that would further strengthen the relationship between the Qemant and the Amhara instead of being used as a pretext to denounce their quest for identity.

Disputing the decision of the regional government, the Qemant organizing committee appealed to the House of Federation based on proclamation No. 251/2001, which stipulates that a concerned body can appeal to the House of Federation if the region does not pass on a decision within two years or if they are not satisfied with the decision.

In the meantime, the organizing committee, which managed to build mass support through time, especially following the 2007 Census, called its supporters for demonstrations in several *woredas* such as Chilga, Lay Armachio, and Gondar protesting the decision by the

regional council.²⁰⁶ Schools were closed in Chilga and Lay Armachio *woredas* to express their grievances in a non-violent way and demand their constitutional right for self-administration. However, there were also some incidents of violent demonstrations in *woredas* such as Ayikel, where properties belonging to the Amhara were destroyed. Since then, the overall situations have become tense and interaction between the Qemant and the Amhara have deteriorated.

The tense relationship further resulted in contestation over property and land between the Amhara and the Qemant. One case in point is the fight over St. Mary Church locally called *šum>mara Mariyam* located in Tekil Dengay. Founded in 1139, the church was one of the earliest and historic churches of the area, which is predominantly Qemant. In mid-January of 2015, an armed group of people from the Tach Armachio *woreda* (where the Amhara are dominant) tried to take the Ark of St. Mary from the church. The meaning behind the name *šum>mara* was interpreted in Amharic (*šum* means chief) and was considered as an entitlement of the Amhara over the Ark. Further, self-identification of the Qemant was negatively interpreted as a deviation from Orthodox Christianity and a return back to ancestral religious tradition. This resulted in a confrontation between the armed group and the local Qemant people in Tekil Dingay town that was temporarily averted through the intervention of the local elders.

In other localities, open conflicts were observed between individuals and groups who identified themselves as Qemant and Amhara. This resulted in killings and displacements of people from both sides. Report by the Ethiopian Human Right Commission (2016) also discussed confrontation between the Qemant and the security forces of the Amhara regional government. The local militia and the regional security personnel were divided along ethnic lines as well. Similarly, according to informants from both the Qemant and the Amhara, partiality and loyalty to one's ethnic group were observed at every level of government office.

Partial Acceptance of the Qemant's Quest for identity

The increasing tension and violence and the pressure from the federal government forced the Amhara region to reconsider its decision. On 13th of March 2015, the Amhara National Regional State Council

206 For example, in February 2014, street demonstration was held in Central Gondar.

announced its decision to recognize Qemant's quest for identity and self-administration. Reversing its previous positions and subsequent discourses, the regional government then declared the demands of the Qemant as just and thus the failure to address them was undemocratic. The regional government had changed its criteria of ethnic identification from few objective ethno-cultural features such as language and culture to consider the Qemant's subjective identifications. Accordingly, in March 2015 the Regional Council declared:

መሰረታዊው ጥያቄ የተፈታ በመሆኑ የራስ አስተዳደር የማከናወኑ ስራ ተግባራዊ ይደረጋል።

Since the fundamental demands [of the Qemant] have been addressed, now the [requested for] self-administration would be implemented.

Accordingly, under proclamation No. 229/2015, Qemant special *woreda* was established and endorsed by the regional council. Out of the total of 126 *kebeles* that were claimed by the Qemant, the council approved for the first time the Qemant's Self-administration over forty-two *kebeles* cutting across Lay Armachio and Chilga *woredas* of West Gondar zone.²⁰⁷ These *kebeles* were identified by the Amhara regional government as a contiguous territory inhabited by people who identified themselves as well as by the surrounding Amhara population as Qemant. However, the Qemant rejected the revised decision as it significantly reduced the number of *kebeles*, and accused the council of using a new tactic to divide up and weaken the ethnic base of the Qemant.

Referendum as a Solution

With persistent upheavals in the region, the regional government declared a change in its approach ones again. This time, in 2017, based on recommendation given by the House of Federation, casting referendum in the contested *kebeles* was opted as a final solution. As it was the case among the Siltie in 2001, the House of Federation encouraged referendum to allow the concerned claimants decide on the identity question via direct participation (Beza and Negussie 2020).

Although both the Qemant and the Amhara National Regional State seemed to have agreed at the beginning, another round of ambiguity

207 Seventeen *kebeles* were from Chilga *woreda* and the remaining twenty-five were from Lay Armachio.

started very soon. The position of the regional government was to set up the Qemant special administration as per proclamation No. 229/2015, over the already recognized forty-two *kebeles*, and then to conduct referendum on the remaining contested *kebeles*. On the other hand, the Qemant organizing committee demanded referendum before the establishment of the administrative unit. The Committee's fear was that once they accepted the offer and established their administration over the forty-two *kebeles*, they may not have a mandate to demand referendum in the remaining *kebeles* outside of the new administrative unit.

In the meantime, tensions escalated, and violent conflicts took place in different *woredas* of central and west Gondar zone urging the federal government to put pressure on the regional government. Under apparent pressure from the federal government, a coalition committee was formed with representatives selected from the regional government and the Qemant organizing committee. The committee was said to have discussed with residents of Central and West Gondar zones, and agreed on the scope of Qemant self-administration through referendum.

The long-awaited referendum was held in September 2017 under the supervision of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Following the referendum, a total of 69 *kebeles* were recognized to be organized as Qemant nationality administration (*yeQemant yäbehérésäb asetädadär*). After long contestations, negotiations and conflicts, the Qemant won recognition for their identity. What has left to be a continued source of disagreement was three *kebeles* in Metema *woreda*, which were disregarded for the reason that they are not contiguous territories. This continued to have become reasons for violent conflicts between the Amhara and Qemant with rising casualties and displacements.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the process of negotiations and contestations over ethnic identity of the Qemant living in Amhara national regional state. In the post-1991 period, Ethiopia has been reconstituted into an ethno-linguistically organized federal state. Though many minorities have been recognized and entitled to a certain level of self-administration, some others, especially those whose cultural features have banished, faced challenges in their claims of identity and self-administration.

The long history of interactions between the Amhara and the Qemant and legal clauses used in determining claims of self-administration made the contestations and negotiations very complex. The nature of population settlement on the ground may not necessarily correspond with the ethnic boundaries that policy makers want to see. Hence, an attempt to allocate the Qemant to a rigidly defined territorial unit was not possible. On the other hand, for the Qemant, who have assimilated and lost its cultural features to the Amhara, using Article 39(5) of the constitution that emphasizes on the totality of the objective markers of identity for a group has further complicated the problem.

The findings of the study clearly showed how state policies, which set criteria of ethnic identification, ethnic entitlements and mis/recognition, impact ethnic self-understandings of groups. During changes in circumstances, individuals and groups encounter a new situation that triggers them to rethink their ethnic identity. That, in turn, could necessitate reclaiming their “lost” ethnicity regardless of the absence of objective ethno-cultural features. This Qemant ethnography revealed how actors reconstruct and consolidate ethnic identity through protracted contestations, negotiations, and conflicts.

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